A **mermaid** is a mythological creature with a female human head and torso and the tail of a fish. Mermaids have a broad representation in folklore, literature, and popular culture. The word is a compound of *mere*, the Old English word for "sea", and *maid*, a woman. The male equivalent is a *merman*.

Much like sirens, mermaids sometimes sing to people and gods and enchant them, distracting them from their work and causing them to walk off the deck or run their ships aground. Other stories depict them squeezing the life out of drowning men while attempting to rescue them. They are also said to carry humans down to their underwater kingdoms.

History

The first known mermaid stories appeared in Assyria. The goddess Atargatis, mother of Assyrian queen Semiramis, loved a mortal shepherd and unintentionally killed him. Ashamed, she jumped into a lake to take the form of a fish, but the waters would not conceal her divine beauty. Thereafter, she took the form of a mermaid—human above the waist, fish below—though the earliest representations of Atargatis showed her as a fish with a human head and legs.

The *One Thousand and One Nights* includes several tales featuring "Sea People", such as *Djullanar the Sea-girl*. Unlike the depiction in other mythologies, these are anatomically identical to land-bound humans, differing only in their ability to breathe and live underwater. They can interbreed with land humans, the children of such unions sharing in the ability to live underwater.

Mermaids were noted in British folklore as unlucky omens – both foretelling disaster and provoking it.

Some mermaids were described as monstrous in size, up to 610 m.

Mermaids could also swim up rivers to freshwater lakes. One day, in a lake near his house, the Laird of Lorntie went to aid a woman he thought drowning; a servant of his pulled him back, warning that it was a mermaid, and the mermaid screamed after that she would have killed him if it were not for his servant.

On occasion, mermaids could be more beneficent, teaching humans cures for disease.

Mermen were noted as wilder and uglier than mermaids, but they were described as having little interest in humans.

Claimed sightings of dead or living mermaids have come from places as diverse as Java and British Columbia. There are two Canadian reports from the area of Vancouver and Victoria, one from sometime between 1870 and 1890, the other from 1967.